

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Tormented by Twisted English

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The article below is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

Hardly a day passes in which I don't receive an email, usually one that's widely distributed and from a more senior member of our community, using the pronoun "myself" incorrectly. It's my own pet peeve, but I imagine our 5-Eyes partners questioning our reliability when they see our seniors making this basic mistake. Furthermore, my boss regularly misuses a relatively common word. It hangs in the air when we talk with customers and I squirm when I see their confusion. Is there an appropriate way to correct him?

Signed,
Wincing

My dear LexiConstable,

Misusing words is one of my pet peeves, too. I find it even more annoying when the person misusing them is doing so in an effort to impress others with his intelligence! Fortunately, this is an easy problem for the Vocabulary Police to rectify.

Improper use of "myself," along with the erroneous "I" instead of "me" ("between you and I..." or "Send your timesheets to Sally and I by noon") are all too common in the workplace. It's part of a bigger problem of people trying to sound hyper formal and in so doing, speaking incorrectly. So let me set the record straight: *myself* is a reflexive pronoun, meaning that the subject of the sentence is doing the action to him- or herself. You can easily remember this because "reflexive" has the same root as "reflection" -- when you look in a mirror **you** can see **yourself**. Here are some examples:

- I can feed myself.
- [You should] Listen to yourself!
- He poked himself in the eye.

It is therefore incorrect to have someone else do something to you and use the reflexive pronoun as the object of the verb (ex., "Give the book to Jane or myself," or "Please reply to myself or Hal by COB.") Use "me" instead.

As for the other issue of confusing *I* and *me*, *I* is used for the subject of a sentence, and *me* for the object. Without going into detail about prepositions and the like, you can often tell whether to use *I* or *me* by simply eliminating the other person in the equation. (You wouldn't say "Send your timesheets to I by noon," would you?)

Now, regarding your boss' **malapropism** in meetings with customers, unless he is very dense, you can probably clue him in by simply using the word correctly a few times in his presence. If he cocks his head and looks confused, it's an indication he may be catching on to the discrepancy in usage, and you might have an opening to discuss it. Gently.

If your subtle attempts to enlighten him pass by as unheeded as your hints for a promotion, try the direct approach. Pull him aside the next time it happens and say that you noticed some customers were confused when he mentioned [the word]. Tell him there are probably regional variations in usage (to allow him to save face), but that the most common usage you're aware of is [correct definition], or that it sounded like he really meant [other word]. The important thing is to do this in private and without the least hint of superiority in your attitude. He may be embarrassed, so you might want to be ready with a self-effacing anecdote of your own ("No matter how many times I look it up, I can never remember the difference between *affect* and *effect*") or a quip about how the last thing the two of you want is for the customers to be any **more** confused than the highly-technical discussion already made them.

Last of all, if you are uncomfortable with the direct approach, you could always resort to leaving a dictionary open on his desk with one of those sticky arrows, used to show people where to sign, pointing to the word in question.

One caveat: before correcting your boss, make sure you're right. Take a minute to look up the word and verify that his usage is, indeed, incorrect. There are few things more embarrassing than correcting someone when **you're** the one who's wrong -- especially when that someone is your boss.

Zelda
